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Bush faces battle over airline crisis Democrats want to help laid-off workers

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Washington -- A planned Bush administration bill to provide new airline security measures could become part of a nasty partisan tug-of-war over benefits for laid-off airline workers.

President Bush will use a trip to Chicago's O'Hare Airport today to announce proposed measures to make flying safer for passengers. But Democrats warned yesterday that they wanted any bill on airline security to include help for the more than 100,000 airline industry workers who face layoffs after the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon Sept. 11.

"We have indicated to the White House and to our Republican colleagues that it would be very difficult for us to pass the airline security bill without attaching some legislation that allows us to address the myriad of problems we're facing with unemployed workers," said Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle,

D-S.D.

Bush's airline security package is expected to include hiring armed air marshals to ride on civilian flights, reinforcing cockpit doors and increasing federal oversight and training for airport security screeners. Another proposal circulating in the administration would install cameras to let pilots in the cockpit see the passenger areas.

The goal is to restore the public's confidence in commercial aviation, an industry that accounts for 10 percent of the nation's gross domestic product.

"We're going to deal with airport security (today) as well as other measures to try and convince the American public it is safe to fly," Bush said yesterday.

Any action the president suggests on security screeners could be controversial. Bush and many Republicans reportedly favor setting federal standards for the screeners and possibly even paying for them but allowing private firms to hire and supervise the workers.

Many in Congress and at the AFL-CIO, on the other hand, have proposed making the 28,000 low-paid screeners federal employees. Currently, the screeners work for private contractors hired by the airlines. Few stay with the job for long because most don't make much more than minimum wage.

But the debate over how best to handle security screenings will be overshadowed by the far bigger fight looming on whether to tie airport security legislation to a benefits package for laid-off airline workers.

Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., argues that the two issues should be treated separately. Teaming the two could slow passage of the airline security measure,

he warned.

To Democrats, that argument sounds more than vaguely familiar. They wanted to include help for airline workers in the \$15 billion airline bailout measure passed last week, but backed off when Bush and the Republicans warned it would be too controversial.

The Democratic measure provides extended health insurance coverage and unemployment benefits and retraining for new jobs. The price tag is put at \$3 billion.

With the number of planned layoffs growing daily, quick action is needed, Democrats argued. Yesterday, for example, Delta Air Lines announced plans to lay off 13,000 workers, or 15 percent of its workforce.

Layoffs also are spreading to such related businesses as hotels, car rental companies, air caterers and restaurants.

"Just as we have moved quickly to safeguard the continued existence of our airline industry, we should move to protect the working men and women," said Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose.

Bush said Tuesday that he had assigned Labor Secretary Elaine Chao to develop options for aiding the laid-off workers, but his administration hasn't specified what measures it would propose.

Security issues

When President Bush announces his passenger-safety package today, it's likely to call for the following:

- Air marshals for civilian flights.
- Reinforced cockpit doors.
- Increased federal oversight and training for airport baggage screeners.

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